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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN ISLAMIC COMMUNITY
OF MACEDONIA QUIETS AT START OF RAMADAN

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On the eve of Ramadan the reinstatement of Skopje Mufti Taxhedin Bislimi by Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) President Sulejman Rexhepi marked an easing of tensions over leadership of the organization. The two sides had carried out a bitter battle in the media and in a letter-writing campaign to GoM leaders and foreign missions for nearly a month following Bislimi's ousting by Rexhepi. Since Rexhepi took the helm of the regrettably politicized ICM in 2006 with DPA support, most observers expected challenges to his leadership when rival ethnic Albanian party DUI took the ruling-coalition spot formerly held by DPA in July. There are indications that Mufti Bislimi is not alone in wanting change in the ICM leadership, as one imam and analyst reported to us that many muftis are only awaiting political "cover" from DUI to force Rexhepi out. DUI leadership, though, does not seem to be interested in playing an active role in shaping the ICM or determining its leadership. The quieted tensions are expected to last at least through Ramadan, but problems of factions within the ICM are expected to continue. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) ICM President Sulejman Rexhepi, some suggest in an effort to secure his leadership of the traditionally politicized ICM following the shift of ethnic Albanian political power from DPA to DUI, led a sudden re-write of the ICM's constitution in late July. Critics say the revisions concentrated power in the office of the Presidency, limited the autonomy of mosques, and ended the power-sharing arrangement of the Assembly of Muftis. Skopje Mufti Taxhedin Bislimi openly opposed the constitutional changes, and Rexhepi discharged him from his position on August 8. The two sides then battled for nearly a month in the media and through a letter-writing campaign aimed at both the GoM and the international community. We met with Rexhepi in late August to make clear that we would not become involved in the leadership dispute and to suggest that the ICM's key focus should be the spiritual needs of its community members rather than faction-based or politically-driven power struggles.

¶3. (SBU) Imam and analyst Ramadan Ramadani told us in an August meeting that Bislimi's opposition to Rexhepi is indicative of broader unrest within the ICM, saying that other muftis and imams are "just waiting for the signal" to openly oppose Rexhepi's leadership and force changes at the top of the ICM. That "signal," according to Ramadani, would be political cover in the form of an assurance from DUI President Ahmeti that he would instruct the Ministry of

Interior to provide the security needed to allow changes at the top of the ICM, including responding quickly and firmly to any threats issued by Rexhepi. However, in an August 27 meeting with the Ambassador, Ahmeti indicated that he would not/not become involved in the politics of leadership of the ICM.

¶4. (SBU) In a surprise move on August 26, Rexhepi authorized the reinstatement of Bislimi as Mufti of Skopje, calling the action an effort to "seek reconciliation a week ahead of the holy month of Ramadan." Analyst Ramadani calls the reinstatement a "temporary solution," certain that muftis who oppose Rexhepi's changes to the ICM constitution, notably the Muftis of Gostivar and Tetovo, will join Bislimi in seeking to oust Rexhepi after the end of Ramadan (September 30).

¶5. (SBU) Comment: With each public debate over the leadership of the ICM or individual mosques, the organization is viewed as increasingly less in-touch with the needs of its members. In a May visit to Skopje's Hatunxhik Mosque, leadership of which was caught up in DPA/DUI political in-fighting during the parliamentary elections campaign, worshippers told us of their strong interest in removing politics from their mosque and the ICM, and re-focusing its leadership on spiritual matters. While traditionally politicized, the ICM has further splintered in recent months, and factions within the organization cannot be linked simply to political affiliation. Insiders describe as many as five separate groups within the ICM competing for leadership and resources. If Ahmeti holds true to his stated desire to de-politicize the ICM, the competing factions within the ICM will have to work out a leadership arrangement on their own,

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hopefully taking into consideration the interests of ICM membership in a spiritually-focused organization. We expect that public airing of leadership tensions in the ICM will resurface following Ramadan. End Comment.

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